Mr. Secrets

Henry Adams & the Breakdown of the Exemplary Tradition in American Autobiography

JOANNE JACOBSON

SINCE THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, American autobiography has celebrated both America and the form itself as the ideal grounds of personal transformation. Enlightenment individualism found in personal narrative its perfect medium and its perfect champion—the means both to portray the autonomous protagonist on a trajectory of self-improvement and, at the same time, to showcase the writer's success in the project of self-invention. From the disparate, raw materials of private experience, American autobiography has forged a series of exemplary success narratives—"fit," as Benjamin Franklin famously put it, "to be imitated"—and modeled those narratives publicly.[1]

Yet if autobiography remains the podium from which many well-known Americans (from Monty Hall, Loretta Lynn, and Lee Iococca to Colin Powell and Bill Clinton) continue to align themselves with the rags-to-riches model of public achievement, much of American autobiography has now turned away from the exemplary voice. Neither America nor American autobiography has retained its confident hold on exemplary status. Nor has narrative's potential for transparency—its gift for revealing in the fragments of private experience the potential for public wholeness and meaning—retained its credibility, especially during recent years. Instead, many American autobiographers of the final decades of the twentieth century reveal about themselves information that refuses to unknot into linear narrative and that resists serving public utility. These writers uncover information about their families that casts a shadow not only over their own identity but also over their ability to author, and obscures the power to shape memory in the self-creating act of narrative that is essential

to the exemplary autobiographical tradition. In these texts, the hold of the past is darkly confirmed rather than victoriously broken. These narratives call into question autobiography's great promise to make "America" come true—the ability to start new, tabula rasa.

When we track this late-twentieth-century retreat from the eighteenth-century exemplary voice in American autobiography, one text appears poised at a pivotal turn-of-the-twentieth-century moment: *The Education of Henry Adams*. Adams backed steadily away from the Enlightenment tradition of cultural stewardship to which his ancestors had been loyal and, simultaneously, from the projection in autobiography of an exemplary national model. Secretive and suspicious, the *Education* seems to take pleasure in undermining the Enlightenment's regenerative hopes both for America and for American authorship, and in rendering its cantankerous author not "fit to be imitated." Those doubts have sown Henry Adams's own ironically exemplary public legacy—a century after the private publication of the *Education*—on one of the most prolific generations of writers of autobiography in U.S. history.

MORE THAN A CENTURY before Adams, there was Franklin. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* has for more than two centuries stood out among the origin narratives of an unusually articulate generation of writer-politicians, as an American *Genesis*, for in it both Franklin and Franklin's text emerge as national exemplars.

In the *Autobiography*, Franklin chronicles his victorious liberation from a pre-Enlightenment past that he frames with increasing drama and sharpness—and significance—as pre-"American." Franklin aggressively wrote the members of his family into his own success story, where they serve as strategic resources in his acquisition of personal power—an acquisition that comes to exemplify America's human potential. Franklin characterizes his father and mother as relics, however well meaning, of a static Puritan past. They are made complicitous in the apprenticeship to his older brother, whose abusive conditions justify Franklin's flight from Boston. His future wife's first impression of him in Philadelphia—"dirty from my Journey" and struggling awkwardly up Market Street with his "three great Puffy Rolls"—becomes, subsequently, the point against which Franklin the protagonist marks his new trajectory of upward moblity and Franklin the writer sets in motion his newly imagined life. [2] Like the early employers and sponsors (Keimer, Keith, Merideth) whose false mentorship provides a backdrop for Franklin's growth, family members are introduced

and then dropped from the narrative to highlight, in their wake, Franklin's own dynamically independent destiny.

Individualistic though this story is, of course, it is far from personal. It does not reveal much feeling (about for example, the losses Franklin endured, alone, when he was young and vulnerable). And while his autobiography shamelessly advertises for posterity Franklin's own ability to master through the application of intellect and industry every challenge he encounters—from setting up a subscription library to paving and cleaning and lighting the streets of Philadelphia—in these victories it also advertises an America that puts such mastery within the reach of every reader. While the autobiography dramatizes his own successes as arbiter and paragon of virtue—experimenting with vegetarianism, mounting his "bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection"—it also dramatizes an America where such personal initiative will almost inevitably yield empowering results.[3] Even as Franklin's autobiography showcases his ability to overcome the mistakes that youthful inexperience and indiscretion led him to commit, it also showcases his newfound ability to name the "great Errata of my Life," to locate them in a narrative of self-improvement, and to write away on American ground the Puritan vision of human depravity, powerlessness, and immobility.[4]

Conflating his own origin narrative with the origin narrative of "America," Benjamin Franklin modeled both autobiography and America as the quintessential forms of modernity: at once epitome and instrument of the human potential for self-invention and transformation.[5] The then new American conditions of self-authorship that Franklin modeled in the *Autobiography* paralleled the new American conditions of selfhood that he championed; both would set human beings free from the static past. Like autobiography, the "America" that Franklin proclaimed would rise on the world stage as human-centered and anti-authoritarian; like Franklin's autobiography, Franklin's America exemplified a viable alternative to the past's oppression and trauma.

More than a century later, Henry Adams looked back toward his family legacy and toward his autobiographical predecessors with a sense of burden and loss that profoundly challenged Franklin's optimism. In effect, Adams announced as his subject in the *Education* the eroded credibility of the exemplary tradition in American autobiography—and, ultimately, of the Franklinian models of selfhood, of authorship, and of America itself.

The preface to the *Education* introduces the reevaluation of that legacy of Enlightenment initiative and mastery as the occasion of Adams's writ-

ing:

> The student must go back beyond Jean-Jacques [Rousseau], to Benjamin Franklin, to find a model . . . of self-teaching. Except in the abandoned sphere of the dead languages, no one has discussed what part of education has, in his personal experience, turned out to be useful, and what not. This volume attempts to discuss it. (xxix)

Adams's retreat from the first-person and from the Enlightenment's most fundamental assumptions about human significance, human knowledge, and human power put him on provocative ground, modeling the "faults of the patchwork" of his ancestors on an anonymous "manikin" (xxx). Envisioning that figure in the new language in which the new science of physics was acknowledging new difficulties in apprehending the world, Adams challenged the rational, empirical foundations of Enlightenment individualism:

> The manikin, therefore, has the same value as any other geometrical figure of three or more dimensions. . . . [I]t is the only measure of motion, of proportion, of human condition; it must have the air of reality; must be taken for real; must be treated as though it had life. Who knows? Possibly it had! (xxx)

In turn, in his first chapter, "Quincy," Adams posited the defining characteristic of his life as disjunction and suggested the inadequacy of narrative as a means of strategy for countering either momentum or unity. Between Quincy and State Street, between Adams on his father's side and Brooks on his mother's, "From earliest childhood the boy was accustomed to feel that, for him, life was double. Winter and summer, town and country, law and liberty, were hostile" (9). And rather than setting this gnarl of family as a point out of which he would, like Franklin, write himself free, Adams projected it as his destiny. "What could become of such a child of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries," Adams queried, "when he should wake up to find himself required to play the game of the twentieth?" (4) As beached at the cusp of the modern age as his aged grandmother; "Louis Seize, like the furniture" (19); "distinctly branded . . . heavily handicapped" (3) by an inherited past, Adams would be, he responded, as disempowered by cultural change as Franklin had been empowered by it.

Adams made a pair of radical literary decisions in the *Education* that set in angry relief his doubts about the viability of the exemplary auto-

biographical tradition in playing "the game of the twentieth" century. Burdened by a sense of alienation and isolation, Adams turned his back on the public, cutting off access to his autobiography and limiting *audience* to the hundred or so kindred spirits whom he counted on to share his estrangement. "I knew that not a hundred people in America would understand what I meant. . . . I need not publish when no one would read or understand," Adams lamented in the letter that accompanied William James's copy of the *Education*.[6] And—witness to a lost America of possibility, continuity, and community—Adams turned his back on *narrative* as well, leaving a twenty-year gap in the *Education*, between "Failure (1871)" and "Twenty Years After (1892)," around the excruciatingly private heartache of his wife's suicide. In one of the few even oblique references to Clover Adams's death, Adams recalled at the end of the chapter his 1892 return from Europe to Washington to her memorial statue, "to the cemetery known as Rock Creek, to see the bronze figure which St. Gaudens had made for him in his absence" (329). But he never even once put her name or his own feelings into words. Instead, Adams stood as usual aside, watching others, voyeur rather than Franklinian actor: "The interest of the figure was not in its meaning, but in the response of the observer" (329). While the exemplary voice and narrative had promised to carry Franklin out of the past's traumas, trauma brought Adams up short, in ironic silence: "At past fifty, Adams solemnly and painfully learned to ride the bicycle. . . . Nothing else occurred to him as a means of new life" (330).

Of course, the *Education* did go forward out of this vortex of silence. One might in fact argue that the *Education* constitutes Henry Adams's greatest victory as a writer, for in it he grappled openly with a bewildering set of challenges to language and to narrative that Franklin's visionary text never imagined, admitted his own confusion and pain—and continued to write. Just two chapters before the twenty-year collapse of language in the *Education*, Adams forced himself back—in language—to the bedside of his much-loved sister, for "ten days of fiendish torture" (287) as she died a slow, gruesome death from lockjaw. There Adams took his own lingering, rhythmic stock of the taunting contradiction between nature's undisturbed sensuality—"the soft shadows . . . of the Italian summer, the soft, velvet air" (288)—and the shattering of confidence in empiricism on which his eighteenth-century forebears, as well as Franklin, had counted: "For the first time, the stage-scenery of the senses collapsed; the human mind felt itself stripped naked, vibrating in a void of shapeless energies, with resistless mass, colliding, crushing, wasting, and destroying what

these same energies had created and labored from eternity to perfect" (288). Ultimately, just two chapters in the wake of his twenty-year silence, "The Dynamo and the Virgin" generated a set of metaphors for cultural unity and historical evolution that offered an ingenious solution to the authorial crisis that Adams encountered, "aching to absorb knowledge, and helpless to find it" (379), at the 1900 Paris Exposition. Early in the *Education* Adams had set "this problem of running order through chaos" (12) as a daunting, lifelong task for himself. In framing as symbolic figures the very "supersensual" (381) forces that continued to stymie him, he managed to rewrite his own confusion into a form of rhetorical mastery: "to Adams the dynamo became a symbol of infinity. As he grew accustomed to the great gallery of machines, he began to feel the forty-foot dynamos as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross" (380).

Although in the culmination of the *Education* Adams proved himself as aggressive a master of language as Franklin—and the greater artist, belying his own relentless claims to failure as an author—he nonetheless never abandoned the critical stance from which the *Education* initially had sniped at the exemplary tradition. "The Dynamo and the Virgin" aimed its critique directly at the Enlightenment belief in the shaping power of individuals and in narrative progress, in "sequences,—called stories, or histories—assuming in silence a relation of cause and effect" (382); the chapter thus contradicted the public model of Franklin's *Autobiography*. "His historical neck broken by the sudden irruption of forces totally new" (382), Henry Adams positioned himself as an anti-model, sidestepping the possibility either of attaining mastery or of starting fresh on the modern American stage that Franklin's autobiography had glowingly promised.

Moreover, the epiphanies to which language brought Henry Adams, in Italy at his sister's deathbed and in Paris at the Great Exhibition, were for him writerly solutions that remained private. While Franklin overcame every obstacle that he faced, Adams left questions hanging in the air all around the problems that he raised, to the very end of the *Education*. "No scheme could be suggested to the new American. . . . [T]he next great influx of new forces seemed near at hand, and its style of education promised to be violently coercive" (498), Adams warned in the late chapter "A Law of Acceleration." When he stepped off stage in his final paragraph into the circle of his close friends, Adams hung in the shadow of his disappointment with the life that he had lived, in an increasingly alien world:

> Perhaps some day—say 1938, their centenary—they might be

> allowed to return together for a holiday, to see the mistakes of their own lives made clear in the light of the mistakes of their successors; and perhaps then, for the first time since man began his education among the carnivores, they would find a world that sensitive and timid natures could regard without a shudder. (505)

Adams's final appeal to those treasured allies—his carefully hoarded audience—softened the refrain of loneliness repeated throughout the *Education*, just as his rhetorical prowess called into question his claim of helpless submission to a set of dehumanizing modern forces. Yet together these rhetorical gestures evidence the fact that Adams remained at odds with his American world rather than adopting the Franklinian pose of spokesman for it. In them we see as well that writing autobiography remained for Adams, in turn-of-the-twentieth-century America, a subversive rather than an exemplary act.

AT THE TURN of the twenty-first century, autobiography retains its status as a premier, even defining, genre of American writing—so widely practiced that it has acquired its own "backlash."[7] Yet the exemplary stance that for Benjamin Franklin gave autobiography its authority as the defining medium of "America" and American-ness seems to have receded into a long gone, inaccessible national moment. It is Henry Adams's subversive stance—rooted in a sense of disjunction between private and public, between self and world—that has, instead, acquired greater credibility for many American autobiographiers. Franklin's vision of "America" as a site for throwing off the past and beginning again tabula rasa, and of authorship as the means of achieving that self-invention, has given way to Adams's experience of the past as a source of dissonance, even burden, and of self-authorship as problematic.

An especially striking feature of American autobiographies of the past decade is the frequency with which they revolve around the revelation of family secrets and, consequently, call into question key aspects of the exemplary tradition. In *The Shadow Man* (1996), Mary Gordon unlayers her rediscovery of her father: rather than the Ohio-born, Harvard-educated Catholic poet whom she had known—the devoted father who told her that he loved her "more than God"—David Gordon turns out to have been a Jewish immigrant from Vilna; a high school dropout who published a crudely antisemitic, pornographic magazine called *Hot Dog*; a supporter of

fascism and McCarthyism. In *The Color of Water*, also published in 1996, James McBride tells of his discovery that his mother, who had "raised twelve black children" in a Brooklyn housing project, was actually the run-away daughter of an abusive Orthodox rabbi. And in *My Brother*, published the following year, Jamaica Kincaid returns to Antigua to face her brother's secretive battle with AIDS: "Who is he?" she has to ask herself. "How does he feel about himself, what has he ever wanted?"[8]

In each of these memoirs, secrets render opaque the family past on whose transparency Benjamin Franklin had counted—as both protagonist and author—in dramatizing his exemplary mastery. In each, the narrator is thrown from the start into a passive, even defensive, position rather than an initiating posture, constantly anticipating knowledge that never becomes complete. And in each of these texts "America" shifts under the feet of the writer—from an ideal location on which to make a fresh start, unencumbered by past or restraint, to a source of lurking trauma, inadequately anticipated and comprehended.

James McBride and his siblings "traded information on Mommy the way people trade baseball cards."[9] Who then exactly is Mommy's son, the author of *The Color of Water*, whose story is still unraveling? Jamaica Kincaid's helplessness as a protagonist, paying out of pocket at her home pharmacy in Vermont for medications that will only postpone her brother's fated death in Antigua, is paralleled by the impasse that she reaches as an author in *My Brother*. Even when Kincaid finally discovers, through a chance encounter in Chicago, that her brother had been a gay man, this hidden knowledge comes too late to complete Kincaid's task as an author, too late to illuminate anything except the lack of closure that she feels at her brother's death:

> That night as he lay dying and calling the names of his brothers and his mother, he did not call my name, and I was neither glad nor sad about this. For why should he call my name? I knew him for the first three years of his life, I came to know him again in the last three years of his life. . . . I had never been part of the tapestry, so to speak.[10]

To control, to shape—and to complete—the disparate elements of personal experience in narrative was the empowering Enlightenment discovery that Franklin modeled for posterity in his autobiography, but none of these contemporary writers can get a sufficiently firm grip on the elements of their own stories to move forward with Franklin's unifying, exemplary

confidence.

Just as the narrative "tapestry" remains impossible for Jamaica Kincaid to salvage, so Mary Gordon's hold on her own narrative gives way in the face of revealed family secrets. The more deeply her narrative enters into her father's hidden story, the more vulnerable, rather than masterful, Gordon feels. She is frightened when she realizes that her father, instead of studying at Harvard as she had thought,

> was working at the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Reading on his own time. Furtive. Yearning.
>
> It is unbearable for me to think of him in this way. If he is yearning, then I am unsafe.[11]

These writers become "unsafe" in their personal narratives because the discovery of secrets long, and deliberately, kept from them undermines their own sense of identity. They experience the revelation of family secrets in adulthood as disempowering, disordering, dislocating. *Telling* plunges each text into a realm of un-wholeness rather than bestowing the whole-making momentum of exemplary autobiographical narrative. Susan Bergman's 1994 memoir, *Anonymity: The Secret Life of an American Family*, evokes the splitting effect that followed her discovery that her father—whom she had known as a devoted husband and strict Christian—had for many years, like Kincaid's brother, led a secret life as a gay man: "It was not until my father died [of AIDS] that we found out about his other life. Then our other lives began." Unlike Franklin, Bergman does expect personal narrative to write away the traumas that family can impose on children; instead, personal narrative takes her back to the un-rooted life in which family locked her into dissonance, made her feel "other" to herself, as though she was not "the same as myself all the way through."[12]

In another kind of recent American memoir, adult children of famous parents reveal in public the secret truths of their parents' rage and alcoholism and substance abuse that they had preserved throughout their own childhoods. In such "tell-all" volumes, many of them bestsellers, the daughters and sons of Joan Crawford, John Cheever, and James Dickey find the opportunity to unburden themselves in public, and, one suspects, the primal satisfaction of revenge. But the relief experienced by those who break their own silence is not so easily shared by those writers who discover as adults that they have been shut out of their own family story. James McBride is the exception here in that he closes the circle of his mother's puzzle with a peacemaking return to her hometown, and he consolidates

his story around his mother's racially transcendent formulation: "God is the color of water."[13] Mary Gordon's decision to disinter her father and to re-bury him in the presence of her new knowledge does not bring her to the same unifying clarity. The final pages of *The Shadow Man* teeter instead, uncertainly, between the satisfying closure of her son's conclusion that "Love is stronger than death" and her friends' lingering concern that "what I'm doing is crazy."[14]

Ultimately, these texts tell their most powerful emotional truths in the narrative limits that they expose. Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* opens with a scene that hovers in incompleteness even as it takes haunting hold of the entire text: "My sharpest memory is of a single instant surrounded by dark. I was seven, and our family doctor knelt before me where I sat on a mattress on the bare floor. . . . 'Show me the marks,' he said. 'Come on, now. I won't hurt you.'" Karr's loyalty to absence itself—to "the missing story"—as an element of experience produces a text that conveys childhood as a condition of silence, of incompleteness, of being buffeted by a world that never ceases to be mysterious and inexplicable.[15] Nor does Karr allow narrative to relieve the trauma of remembered pain or to force festering, killing illness into the background. Her grandmother's cancer proves as relentless and as dehumanizing as Henry Adams's sister's lockjaw, so much so that her grandmother actually reeks "from her open mouth, from deep inside her where the cancer was doubtless eating out whatever was human."[16] Like Bergman and Gordon and McBride and Kincaid, Karr unmasks memory's unreliablity and instability; she exposes it even as an occasion of betrayal. When her mother eventually reveals her secret past of marriages and abandoned children, her "line-up of wedding rings," it is much too late for memory to be redemptive: "It's only looking back that I believe the clear light of truth should have filled us, like the legendary grace that carries a broken body past all manner of monsters."[17] Neither can confronting the losses that proliferate in the suddenly cracked silence of Kathryn Harrison's memories of incest in *The Kiss* bring back the innocence that her father's seduction forever cost her: "once upon a time I fell from grace, I was lost so deeply in a dark wood that I'm afraid I'll never be safe again." She is left to mourn "for me, the lost child, the child snatched away." Speaking publicly the unspeakable and un-linking herself from her father liberate Harrison, enabling her at the end of *The Kiss* to give herself to her own children and to begin healing her relationship with her mother. But Harrison's un-parenting will be permanent—"The loss of my father will haunt me as it did in the days long past"—and no narrative will be

able to rewrite those private losses and make them yield wholeness.[18]

WHAT SHOULD WE SAY about the American autobiography—and the America—left in the wake of the receding exemplary voice? What does the ebbing, for so many American writers since Adams, of confidence in American lives' "fit-ness to be imitated" tell us about early American autobiography's hopeful intertwining of national idealism and personal experience?

A considerable amount of criticism has been heaped on the revelation of the better-left-private in the contemporary memoir. From the Franklinian peak of emulation and inspiration, American autobiography seems, to many observers, to have declined to the current low of a television talk show: voyeuristic, predictable, emotionally greedy, out for profit, barely literary. Paul John Eakin has suggested that in at least one 1990s autobiography, Howard Stern's *Private Parts*, "self-revelation becomes a form of flashing."[19] "As for the gentle reader of the present," one reviewer recently complained in the *New York Times*,

> they may be forgiven for feeling a little memoired-out—for suspecting that if they consume one more lyrical, ever-so-writerly account of a lousy childhood involving incest, physical abuse, alcoholism, poverty, anorexia, bulemia, drug addition, sexual perversity, they might just pop.[20]

Nor would Henry Adams likely have disagreed about either the self-indulgence or the pandering of the mass culture tell-all paperback. It was Adams, after all, who chose not to tell, not to breach the boundary between the private and the public where his deepest alienation lay.

Nonetheless, Adams's reluctance to tell everything to everyone also testifies to the complications of negotiating that boundary and, especially, of negotiating the boundary between personal experience and cultural consensus. In fact, the doubts that many late-twentieth-century American writers of belletristic autobiography share with Adams represent several kinds of reckoning that the exemplary tradition in American autobiography has not been prepared, or willing, to undertake.

The public disclosure of previously unfaced truths about personal experience—and about personally experienced America—has shaped and freighted a significant amount of *telling* in American autobiography. Long before *The Education of Henry Adams*, African American autobiographers made it their business to expose the distortions of the exemplary tradi-

tion's universally constructed "America." In Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, America constitutes more of an obstacle—to human dignity as well as to personal transformation—than an opportunity. And the silence that Douglass was obligated to preserve around the climactic moment of his escape from slavery stands as a powerful reminder of the limits of American authorship under the Fugitive Slave Law: "It would afford me great pleasure indeed, as well as materially add to the interest of my narrative, were I at liberty to gratify a curiosity, which I know exists in the minds of many . . . ," Douglass told his reader, "but I must deprive myself of this pleasure."[21] A century later, in *Manchild in the Promised Land*, Claude Brown exposed the betrayal of the generation of rural blacks who migrated to the urban North: "It seems that Cousin Willie, in his lying haste, had neglected to tell the folks down home about one of the most important aspects of the promised land: it was a slum ghetto."[22] What better way to call America to task for failing to make good on its promises than to turn autobiography itself against the exemplary "America" that had spawned the form?

Yet in a medium that has tended to expect the writer to exemplify a cultural type, whether of liberation or of oppression, Adams's evocation of alienation remained in important ways more stubbornly personal. This resistance to driving personal experience into seamless, publicly palatable form has emerged as Adams's most compelling legacy among contemporary American writers of autobiography.

Both Richard Rodriguez's 1982 *Hunger of Memory* and Art Spiegelman's 1986 *Maus* echo Adams's sense of family as an arena of unresolved tension and unfulfilled longing. In his subtitle, *The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, Rodriguez refers explicitly to Adams's legacy and thus emphasizes his thematic debt to Adams's alienation from the exemplary tradition of personal freedom, rhetorical mastery, and public self-projection. That alienation resonates in Rodriguez's decision—never peeled free from ambivalence—to be the teller of his mother's family secrets: "I am writing about those very things my mother has asked me not to reveal. Shortly after I published my first autobiographical essay . . . my mother wrote me a letter pleading with me never again to write about our family life."[23] Rodriguez never quite makes peace with the sacrifice of intimacy that his parents made when they gave up Spanish for the sake of their children's upward mobility in the English-speaking United States. Like *The Education of Henry Adams*, *Hunger of Memory* never breaks free of the conflicted relationship between the writer and his America. Moreover, for Richard

Rodriguez language remains—like family and like America—the ground both of his hopes for the future and of irreconcilable conflict. Loss and incompleteness hang over Rodriguez through the final paragraph of the book—as lonely a conclusion as Adams's—in which Rodriguez vainly attempts on a chilly Christmas night to warm his father with his jacket: "I take it to my father and place it on him. In that instant I feel the thinness of his arms. He turns. He asks if I am going home now too. It is, I realize, the only thing he has said to me all evening."[24]

Like Rodriguez's mother, Art Spiegelman's father beseeches his son to respect his secrets: "I can tell you other stories, but such private things, I don't want you should mention;" and like Rodriguez, Spiegelman never quite resolves this question of *telling*. The layers of hiding and secrecy that made possible his father's survival during the Holocaust make it impossible for Spiegelman's father to start anew in America.[25] And they leave a painful, dissonant legacy for the American son who emerges—framed, provocatively, in a comic strip form that never congeals into seamless narrative—as a different kind of "Holocaust survivor." In writing of his own suffering as the child of a survivor of so much suffering, Spiegelman breaks through the taboo of family silence surrounding his mother's suicide and his father's lack of trust and generosity, and he challenges a set of hallowed notions about portraying the Holocaust. In fact, Spiegelman's "survival" remains ambiguous, for he bears the scars of both his father's past and his own. Rather than writing his own liberation from those losses as Franklin had, Spiegelman is left, like Rodriguez and Adams, to mourn the losses of his innocence and childhood.

The emotional damage to which the revelation of private family information testifies in all these recent American autobiographies cuts deep, in layers at once personal, literary, and cultural. These revelations seem essential in coming to terms with emotional truths that the exemplary tradition never faced. Rodriguez and Spiegelman in the 1980s, Kincaid and others in the 1990s, all these writers have dared to admit the reality of trauma and loneliness beneath the victorious upward trajectory of the immigration narrative that Franklin pioneered and mythologized in the eighteenth century. In their "America" we see neither the Franklinian model of autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency that became polished into a national ideal nor even the systemic oppression of the African American slave but, instead, the raw personal face of isolation and confusion. In these texts we see the seductiveness of the promise to start new, tabula rasa, that autobiography made for the American individual, for the

American author, and for America. And in the claustrophobic embrace of family we see what Henry Adams saw at the turn of the twentieth century: that the past never fully unburdens the present, even on the ostensibly healing ground of America.

In short, the breakdown of the exemplary autobiographical tradition has—in the long wake of *The Education of Henry Adams*—decisively exposed that tradition's notions of "America," of Enlightenment individualism, and of narrative as illusory. Adams could not have anticipated the great, inconsolable American traumas of the twentieth century—World War I, the Holocaust, Vietnam, AIDS;traumas incomprehensibly beyond the power of narrative to resolve.[26] Yet he clearly saw the world ahead as different, and he saw clearly the strain that that world's difference would apply to the exemplary tradition's faith in human beings' order-making potential and in the transformative power of American conditions. In evoking a level of alienation that neither narrative nor America could heal, the *Education* called for and modeled a new kind of American text—one that recognized the arrogance and the naivete of modernity.

The American writers of autobiography who have followed Adams have lived with his reservations. As the American world and the American families into which they were born have left them scarred and doubting, they are unlikely to imagine starting from scratch. Nor can they trust the benign plasticity of memory and of narrative on which the exemplary tradition counted. In a terrible sense, recent American writers have had to consider a possibility that Franklin never seemed to imagine: the potential for their own voices to be hurtful. In a world where parents' hold on love has become fragile—"I thought you wouldn't like me anymore," Mary Karr's mother explains in defense of her decision to keep her past secret—or where parents themselves endanger their children—"I had to stop talking," Maya Angelou realized after her stepfather raped her and threatened to kill her beloved brother if she told anyone—lying and forgetting seem safer than memory and speech.[27] To reveal family secrets is to put others' pride and dignity at risk: a father humiliating himself and his son in front of a teenage gas station attendant, making English "sounds as confused as the threads of blue and green oil in the puddle next to my shoes."[28] Could it have been his fear of his own hurtfulness that made Henry Adams choose silence when his wife ended her life after a long, inaccessible depression, his reluctance to leave to posterity his memory of Marian Adams's despair and desperation, and of his own sense of abandonment?

While the erosion of the "exemplary" aura of America and American

authorship might be read as a cultural disappointment, it ought also to be read as a coming of age. This more mature reckoning is the legacy not only of Adams but of Adams's literary milieu, the legacy of realism that has moved American writing—and American individualism—past its early, ideological obligations to nation. Although we may have lost the sense of Enlightenment experimentation and idealism that shaped so much of American literature and American autobiography from Franklin through Thoreau, we may have gained the ability to see "America" as an experienced thing of the present and the past, rather than an imagined thing of the future. Now we can give fuller voice to the fears and insecurities that have stubbornly dogged Americans' spinning of national myths, to the anxieties that quietly trail even the loudest American dreaming. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* set *that* literary agenda half a century ago with Linda Loman's quiet, insistent refrain: "attention must be paid" to the bewildered Willy Lomans, whose expectations of success on Franklinian terms are unlikely to be met by twentieth-century corporate America. And to the Jay Gatsbys, whose abstract, inflated hopes for an America "commensurate to [their] capacity to wonder" have left them fumbling—"It was just personal"—when the real emotional world has pressed upon them.[29] Henry Adams saw the potential for heartbreak—*that* well-kept secret!—beneath the surface of modern America, and Adams recognized the hardening fact that neither America nor narrative could necessarily make the world new. Nearly a century after the *Education* it seems a victory, rather than a diminishment, for American autobiography to be able to face up, finally, to that legacy.

NOTES

1. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (1793, as The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin; New York, 1986), 3.
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